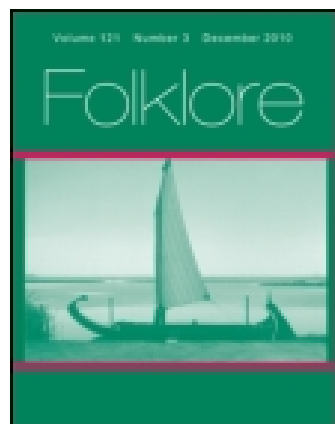


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Red Riding Hood: An Interpretation from Anthropology

Mary Douglas

Today my initial problem is how to interpret a story when it is not clear whether it is meant to be funny or tragic, and when the whole social context is missing. It must be in line with critical theory to say that when *all* you have is the story itself, the meaning is whatever the reader assigns to it. In a sense you, the newest reader, become the author of the current meanings. This should be a comfort to the updating feminist readings of Mother Goose stories, and to psychoanalytic readings or jazzy Monty Python style reworkings or collections of old meanings (Zipes 1993). But it is very little comfort to folklorists or anthropologists who might want to know what the story originally meant to say.

The folklorists I know are mild and tolerant people. The same goes for the conversation analysts. Far from them is it to impose their British, Finnish or German understandings on foreign texts. They would never wish to endorse a cultural imperialism which assumes there is only one true meaning which we happen to possess; to appropriate the sacred texts of other cultures would be abhorrent to them. But what can they do? Either they accept that the archeology of textual meanings is impossible or they accept the transformation of one honourable profession into another, from folklore to literature, from interpretation to reading. We cannot easily abandon the intention to interpret the thing as it was once meant to be.

I propose to borrow an idea from the work of Norbert Elias, and turn what could be called his "distance index" into something more systematic. Behaviour and words about behaviour, the resonance between action and word, between word and body, and between body and cosmos, are anthropologists' normal material. In *The Civilizing Process* Elias emphasised the use of distance to express formality and respect. The smaller the physical distance between persons' bodies, the more the intimacy; this is the low respect end of the continuum. The greater the distance, the more the authority; this is the high respect end (Elias 1978). The projection of the social structure on physical space is so familiar to anthropologists that it seems surprising that Elias felt he had been struck by a novel idea. It can perhaps be developed into a tool of textual criticism that will at least tell us whether a tale is more vulgar or more refined than another in the same genre. And I suggest it will help to show original contrasts between genres. I will

illustrate the idea from stories about people eating people or being eaten, especially Red Riding Hood's experiences with the wolf that ate her grandmother.

The interpretation that I will offer of Red Riding Hood will be drawn from that of the late lamented Yvonne Verdier (1941-89). She was a feminist anthropologist some of whose fieldwork was in the village of Minot, in Burgundy. Interviewing the oldest old women and taking part in farm life she gave us a version that emanates from a known and defined group. It is independent of Perrault and Grimm, rustic not urban, peasant not bourgeois; and very different from what we tell to our children.

Our Version of Red Riding Hood

Our version is a story about a little girl who goes to take butter and cakes to her grandmother; she meets a wolf who asks where she is going and who runs ahead and kills and eats the old lady. Disguised as the grandmother, he gets into her bed before the little girl arrives. An innocent conversation takes place as the child takes stock of changes in the physical appearance of her grandmother:

"What big eyes you have, Grandmama!"

"All the better to see you with, my dear"

(Friendly enough, surely?)

"What big ears you have, Grandmama!"

"All the better to hear you with my dear!"

(Still very benign!)

But when she says,

"What big teeth!" the wolf answers:

"All the better to eat you with!"

He jumps out of bed, grabs her and is just about to devour her when the woodcutter turns up in time to save the child, kill the wolf, cut open the wolf's belly and rescue the grandmother alive. The story is told with mounting excitement between teller and listener, climaxing with a sudden pounce and a flurry of giggles.

We may still ask why we consider the story of Red Riding Hood suitable for small children. A young girl is attacked by a wild beast and only saved in the nick of time. The animal has already killed and eaten her grandmother. Does this present an antique parallel to modern media violence? (Duclos 1994). Are the stories in the Strewel Peter collection really terrifying *grand*

guignol? Is Sweeney Todd suitable for children? Or is it funny? How do we know? To be sure, there are conventions for recognising humour. But the conventions are local and fairly esoteric. A clown has baggy trousers and red nose; the sadder he looks, the funnier is the clowning. If we know the conventions, we can recognise that a narrative has been marked off from everyday reality. But what if we don't?

There are many fascinating Bantu stories about cannibals, male and female (Paulme 1976). Anyone travelling in West or Central Africa will be sure to encounter contemporary tales about white men who go round at night in lorries picking up little black children and taking them off to be butchered and eaten. If anyone questions the validity of the myth, they are given compelling circumstantial evidence. Go to any European hotel, and see for yourself the vast quantities of meat served there regularly, grilled or stewed or in sausages. How else but by cooking their fellow humans can the whites maintain such an extravagant carnivorous cuisine? The culinary details of sausages and grill carry conviction. Are the stories jokes or anti-colonial propaganda? They compare with other accusations of cannibalism, such as the medieval Christian allegation that the Jews performed child sacrifice and child eating, or the ancient Israelites' rebukes to Canaanites offering child sacrifice to Molech (Douglas 1993). A context of hostility allows us to read outrage and disgust; a context of nursery bedtime fun swivels the whole meaning round. But supposing we have not got the context of laughter, how can we know from the text alone?

Sometimes we can recognise verbal framing devices. Red Riding Hood is cut off from realism and the violence of everyday, first by the conventional "Once upon a time ..." opening which declares a world of fantasy. The story then unfolds quite naturalistically until the wolf meets her on the path and speaks to her. Then the second clue—a talking wolf is in a class with the talking bears in Goldilocks, the cat who advises Dick Whittington, the hen in the Beanstalk world who shouts warnings to Jack, the wolf who threatens the three little pigs, and so on. By the very fact of his speech the wolf is situated in a world of fantasy. Third, there is the happy ending, which can be anticipated with its many repetitions, the death of the wolf and the resuscitation of the grandmother. We can see that Red Riding Hood properly told is a story that Nanny would have no reason to ban from the nursery.

In the versions which provided the material for Grimm and Perrault, Red Riding Hood seems to me to be very funny. But how do I know? Even in our own culture, with full context available, we cannot always be sure whether something is a joke or a mistake. Notoriously, no one can see a joke against themselves. If we agree that there is no way of being sure that a joke is intended, it might be better to

avoid thinking of funny/not funny as a set of absolute contrasts. Relatively light, and relatively serious, may be more interesting categories of judgement. My purpose is to show that, even if we did not have some contextual evidence about how the French versions were told, we could still say a lot about the genre from the details about bodily indignity and indecency.

Inversion

First I would like to dispose of the idea that "inversion" is a helpful clue to interpretation. I once argued that the social situation provides the context for seeing a joke (Douglas 1975). I claimed that the social context gives license for the laugh: if the context is wrong, the same event will just not be funny. For recognising "the right context" I took the old idea that a joke has the structure of an inversion, I added the idea that the inversion can be read as an analogy of the social situation, and added one more principle: that if the social structure is of a kind in which reversal is thinkable, then the latent joke is licensed and everyone can laugh; but if the social situation is tense with anxiety and fear, any expression of reversal is too dangerous, and the latent joke will be rejected. I still believe that social awareness flips the joke into and out of the danger areas. This is hard when archaic texts usually give few supporting clues about the needs of the social situation. It would be a hard message for conversation analysts if they were to limit the context to first-hand witness of verbal communication. However I am hoping to contribute to the movement to extend the range of interest in social context and non-verbal communication. I mean to offer a way in which social norms and structures can be taken systematically into account (Gunther and Knoblauch).

The trouble is that, without those clues from the social situation, inversions lie in wait for the interpreter at every step. It is not enough to say that we can recognise a joke because it inverts the order of things. Latent jokes are always present. Inversion is a great religious theme: what is impossible for humans is possible for God; he brings the powerful down and raises up the humble. Inversion is so much everywhere that if it was the sole clue to the presence of a joke we would never stop laughing. Furthermore, recognising inversion in a foreign culture is not so easy. Anyone who thinks we can recognise inversion unequivocally is assuming that norms are beyond and above culture, and that is anathema for anthropologists.

Following Lévi-Strauss's teaching, many have tried to read myths as inverted structures. The tales that we try to interpret in terms of people's institutions often turn out to be, not elaborations upon real life past or present, but inside out and upside down versions of daily practice. But what sort of comfort is

that? What does it tell us about the meaning of the story? Max Müller was embarrassed on behalf of the Greek gods, whose nobility and dignity he championed, by the stories of divine cannibalism. Kronus's swallowing his children seemed to him to be a vulgar and ungodlike way to behave. He came out of the dilemma by claiming that the swallowing stories were not ugly evidence of primitive cannibalism, but beautiful allegories of nature: Kronus, understood as the god of time, swallowed up the day and at dawn regurgitated (Müller 1863). But if some are nature myths, why not all? The interpretation came in for plenty of mockery, with Little Red Riding Hood parodied by E.B. Tylor as the goddess of dawn (Tylor 1871, 319ff).

Would it have helped Müller to say that tales of cannibal gods are presenting exactly the opposite of normal divine behaviour? It is not so easy to use the idea, because with gods what is the right way up? How are we to know whether to read the story the right way up or upside down? Is Red Riding Hood to be taken as an inversion of everyday behaviour or the norm? Was Moloch's hunger for human babies an inversion of Israelite behaviour? Were the Canaanites portrayed by these stories as inverted worshippers? It is tempting to read the general anti-idolatry theme of the Bible into the message that false gods consume children and the true God of Israel protects children (Douglas 1993). However, my conclusion is that inversion is not calibrated delicately enough for our purposes.

In Adam Kuper's account of Southern Bantu cannibal tales we learn that cannibals are contrasted implicitly with the good ancestral spirits, who protect people and foster human health and fertility. Cannibals are also directly contrasted to human beings. Unlike humans, who live in settlements, the cannibal lives in a cave in the bush, like a wild animal. The cannibal hunts human beings (whom he calls "game") and cooks human meat together with animal meat. The cannibal is also very large and very hairy, with oversized genitals. Though more like an animal, he or she often has one huge leg instead of two, or only one toe: in Bantu lore one-leggedness is a characteristic of intermediaries between man and the spirits. Ancestor spirits may live in the sky or below the ground, and may intervene in the form of snakes or birds. When people escape from cannibals, they often do so disguised as birds or snakes (Kuper 1987, 170).

Clearly the Bantu ogres are not like normal human beings, nor are they like ancestors; their habitat is turned in the other direction, towards land instead of towards sky. The ogre is not an opposite, but an intermediary, not necessarily between just two points but possibly on some range of which we only have a small part. "Inversion" does not allow of this triple set of comparisons. The movement of the three genres goes to three levels: up towards spirit and sky, down

towards earthbound humans, and further down towards underground caves. Three kinds of discourse are thus distinguished: that of everyday life, between humans; that between humans and ancestors, in prayer and sacrifice; and that between humans and ogres, dissolving in laughter. Yes, the stories as told to children go into gory details of children being swallowed or entering the body of the ogre via the anus and travelling around the inside of the ogre (with indecent jokes and gales of laughter about the state of his innards) before they are rescued. You cannot get much more disrespectful. In Bantu communicative genres the ogre is definitely treated to the low respect end of the continuum between spatial contiguity and spatial distance.

Decency and Distance

A "dignity register" would be a good name for using distance from the actual body as an expression of respect. The gamut between respect and intimacy projects a spatial indicator of social usage. Linguists have similarly observed that distance in language from bodily function and bodily parts projects respect and disrespect. The distance indicator can carry complex information, not just about a single value for respect, but highly differentiated relationships, once the north and south axis and east/west are taken into account.

The distance indicator that Elias observed for courtly behaviour in sixteenth century Europe has been commonly reported in anthropological studies from the time of Durkheim. But all communicative behaviour deploys an extended analogic structure, and the body is always more or less engaged. The patterning of respect on distance is only one dimension. There is theoretically no end to modelling. Roland Barthes demonstrated the fine degrees of difference between occasions that are signalled by fine degrees of difference in dress (Barthes 1967). Systematically graded differences in dress, food and speech correspond to systematically graded differences in social relations. McKim Marriott's study of the Hindu coding of all substances exchanged showed how a spirituality index is constructed to make a dynamic projection of all ranks of persons in the Indian caste system (Marriott 1976).

Can we not use this spontaneous grading to solve some problems of interpreting a text? It is not a difficult or ambiguous thing to recognise the coarse end of a scale that goes from gross to refined, or from material to spiritual, or from earthy to heavenly, from impure to pure, and so on. Everyone does it all the time. Done with care, it can help to relate one genre to others in the same scale, and one narrative in a genre to others more refined or more vulgar. This, I suggest, is a much more instructive exercise than trying to distinguish between funny and not funny.

Every community discriminates in its references to bodily behaviour between spiritual and gross, respectful and disrespectful, regular and grotesque, gentle and violent. This goes on for as many dimensions as interest the community in question. We cannot expect to notice all the dimensions, but in any one case we could establish the gradient between vulgar and refined. You can call this the distance, or the dignity or the spirituality, index. One end of the spirituality index makes reference to bodily functions and bodily parts that would not be acceptable in polite company. What is and is not acceptable can only be determined by the mythologist's reading in the other genres. We expect the scale of bodily reference to vary according to an unspoken scale of honour and dishonour. The gradients in that scale point to the meaning of the stories (Douglas 1994).

The French Versions: Le Chaperon Rouge

According to the most frequently recorded form of the original Red Riding Hood tale, both the wolf and the little girl eat parts of the grandmother (Verdier 1980). Learning this was, for me, a shock. How could the story about that sweet child have to do with her drinking bowls of her own grandmother's blood? Or eating her grandmother's sexual organs and breasts? It is even more of a shock than discovering that none of the early versions describes her hood as red. Admittedly, the child does not know that the soup that the wolf gives her is made from her grandmother's blood, but none the less, she is an unwitting cannibal.

Another shock is that, though our versions focus on the wolf as a child-eating monster, according to Yvonne Verdier's interpretation based on an analysis of all the available French versions, his role is quite incidental and unimportant. The brothers Grimm did something drastic to the story; it was gentrified almost out of recognition.

In the earlier French versions the conversation between the wolf and the little girl is laced with sexy innuendo: he asks her to get into bed with him and she complies quite happily. In bed together, her surprised remarks on her grandmother's body ("How big ...! How hairy ...! How strong ...!") elicit lewd answers, starting with "All the better to ..." Their far-from-innocent pillow-talk is not at all what Nanny would tolerate. The dénouement in the French versions does not have recourse to a heroic male figure. There is no woodcutter to do battle with the fearsome beast, kill him and slit him open so that the granny can step out alive and well. The young French heroine escapes by her own ingenuity and with the help of other female characters. When she gets frightened she tries to get out of bed. The wolf refuses to let her go. The wolf asks is she not warm and comfortable in bed? She says she must do *pipi*, urgently. He tells her:

"If you must, you can do it in the bed." But she insists that she can't, and finally they hit on a compromise: he ties a rope to her leg and holds on to his end of it so she cannot get away. But once outside she frees herself, slips the rope round the trunk of a tree, then makes a dash for the river. On the other bank stand the washerwomen. They throw a sheet into the water and pull her safely across. When the wolf discovers the ruse, he chases her to the riverbank and tries to persuade the washerwomen to bring him across by the same means. They seem to comply. They throw the sheet in for him, but once he is on it they let go and he is drowned.

The Feminine Order

The language of the French versions suggests we should be imagining a much older girl than our picture books show, *ma petite fille* means both "my little girl" and "my granddaughter." For reasons that will appear later, Yvonne Verdier suggested the story made more sense if she was a girl approaching puberty.

In all the French versions of the story, when the wolf meets the girl he asks her which way she is going to her grandmother's house. Will she take the path of needles or the path of pins? Different versions put different answers into her mouth. The answer she gives does not matter; the important thing is the mention of the two paths. Peasant women in nineteenth-century France, when these stories were collected, had an informal system of age-classes. The stages of a woman's life were distinguished by the symbolism of pins and needles. Pins are easy to use but only make temporary fastenings; needles are employed with skill and perseverance, they make permanent ties. Pins have no opening; putting a thread through the eye of a needle has a simple sexual connotation. The pin can be a symbol of the virgin intacta; the needle is the adult woman. Court-ing girls receive pretty pins as gifts from admirers, or throw pins into the wishing well. The choice between pins and needles is in all the versions before Perrault and the Grimms tidied them up. Any interpretation that omits that detail is suspect.

The mention of pins and needles would alert the French listener to expect a story referring to sex and to the sequence of roles that the female child will go through in her life. After puberty the young village girl used to go with her cohort to another village to spend a happy winter season with the dressmaker. Staying in the dressmaker's house was like a period of ritual seclusion, a light hearted time of initiation into girlhood. It was more like a finishing school in which they became sophisticated and learnt the rudiments of sewing. Though Verdier does not say in so many words, the reference to sophistication gained suggests that they learn how to look their best, how

to deal with admirers, become wise about sex and avoid conception. Living together away from home for the first time the girls formed the solidary ties with other girls. Their home-coming in the spring had its own ceremonious implications. They were deemed then to be the right age to enjoy the frivolous period of courtship, the time of pins and temporary attachments. The passage of the seasons provides a parallel to the maturing of the girls. They would have worked hard in the fields all the summer, in the winter they went away to rest from those hard labours and to meet the girls from other villages and make friendships that would last a life time. After the giddy May festivities they would have matured to womanhood and marriage, the great permanent attachment—the serious work of needles. Finally they would grow old, too old to be able to thread a needle (in both senses), like the grandmother. By omitting the wolf's question about pins or needles, the versions we have received have lost the framing cue for setting the stories in the ritualised passage of the female generations.

What Really Happened

Yvonne Verdier argues that there is nothing in Red Riding Hood to indicate signs of myth inversion. In her grandmother's house the girl conducts herself as she would in a normal kitchen.

Arrivée chez sa grande-mère, la petite fille est invitée par le loup à se restaurer; ou bien c'est elle qui, d'entrée, déclare qu'elle a faim, puis soif (puis sommeil). Il lui dit de prendre de la viande dans le placard, ou le coffre, ou l'armoire, et de se servir un verre de vin. La scène est intime, domestique, le loup dans son lit la regarde s'affairer: elle fait tous les gestes de préparation du repas, sort les ingrédients, allume le feu, remue les casseroles ... Rappelons les gestes du loup. Il arrive, tue la grandmère, la dévore en partie, la saigne, met le sang de côté dans une bouteille, un verre, un plat, une terrine, une écuelle, une assiette, un bol, et réserve la chaire—c'est le terme employé—qu'il range comme des provisions dans le coffre, l'armoire ou le placard. Dans une version c'est la tête qu'il met sur une assiette ... (Verdier 1980, 41).

[Arriving at Grandma's house, the little girl is invited by the wolf to refresh herself; or else it is she who initially says she is hungry, then thirsty (then sleepy). He tells her to take the meat in the sideboard, or chest, or cupboard and to pour herself a glass of wine. The scene is intimate, domestic, the wolf in his bed watches her going about her business: she does all the things necessary to prepare a meal, gets the ingredients out, lights the fire, puts the saucepans on ... Let us recall the actions of the wolf. He arrives, kills the grandmother, eats some of her, drains the blood, puts the blood on one side in a bottle, a glass, a casserole, a pan, a dish, a plate, a bowl, and reserves the flesh—that's the word employed—which he arranges like provisions in the chest, the cupboard or the sideboard. In one version it is the head that he puts on a plate ...]

Except for the presence of the wolf, this is definitely not an inverted version of everyday comportment. That being so, how is it to be interpreted? Was life so rough that little girls really attacked their grandmothers in nineteenth-century France? Robert Darnton, a historian who has paid attention to these Mother Goose stories, has ventured a general comparison between German and French folk tales. He finds more cunning and humour on the French side, more numbskull Simple Simon types of heroes on the German side, dealing with more terror and fantasy. Since he finds that the central feature of this story is that Red Riding Hood cheats the wolf at the end, he adds it to his category of French folk tales which extol roguery. And he will have nothing to say for inversion; if the story characters are unkind to each other, that must have been the way it was at the time of their telling: "If the world is cruel, the village nasty, and mankind infested with rogues, what is one to do?" (Darnton 1984, 29–55). Following Yvonne Verdier, we will agree that there is no inversion, and that the tale has to do with everyday matters, but the story unfolds a hitherto unsuspected meaning. Yvonne Verdier conducted field research among the old women in the village of Minot in Burgundy (Verdier 1979). She argued that the succession of roles in the feminine world is the known backdrop to a range of Mother Goose stories about blood, sex and rivalry. Not just the role transfers between generations of women, but beliefs about female physiology have to be understood. Unlike men, whose bodies are set on a steady course through life alienated from the cycles of nature, those women know that their bodies swing them between reason and emotion on a monthly programme in harmony with the seasons of the year. The women's physiological month reproduces in small Nature's whole year. The days of menstruation correspond to the month of May, when nature swings into a state of fermentation, birthing, hatching, budding, mushrooming in rich profusion.

Accepting the reality of the connection between their bodily cycles and those of nature, women impose rules upon themselves during their own monthly period of fermentation. Fearing that they could contaminate other fermentation processes, menstruating women avoid touching wine vessels or going into the wine cellar or touching pork in brine, lest by contagion with their state, it ferments and turns bad. These are responsibilities of women that demonstrate their close affinity to nature. Their work is giving birth, feeding, washing and caring for the body. With all of this, the cohort of young girls must also be taught that they will advance to take over the reproductive roles of their seniors.

The Mother Goose stories provide an informal reference to the seasonal and life-cycle rituals, which for the girls culminate in the May Day celebrations. The actual arrangements for training the girls and for

ordaining their place in the social order are supported by the rituals of first communion and marriage, a liturgy for which the stories, if that is what they are, provide *ad hoc* commentaries. According to Verdier we should not look for a direct narrative meaning to justify the stories of Sleeping Beauty or Red Riding Hood. To ask what the stories mean as stories hardly makes sense. They have some entertainment value, but that is because of the reference to well-known rituals and statuses. Their meaning is in the play upon the current pattern of feminine roles and upon the conflicts and tensions inherent therein. It is a joke, and at the same time it is not a joke but true, that little girls will always grow up to go into their grandmothers' house and consume the substance of their mothers' mothers.

Puzzles Raised by Narrativisation

The so-called folk tales have been wrongly assimilated to our own idea of narrative. By being treated as legends or folk tales, and by being endowed with a modest equivalence with those of ancient Greek gods and the Teutonic sagas—even by the mere fact of having been collected as stories—they have been laid open to misunderstanding. Forcibly narrativised, Verdier found these tales to be more like a genre of little proverbs, games, lampoons, limericks, joky moral lessons. In her view, they never were full blown stories with beginnings, middles and ends, but have been forced by nineteenth-century folklorists into the narrative genre. It is doubtful whether there is any other genre in our culture that corresponds to such little bits and pieces. Scraps of songs and sayings making a salacious commentary upon the feminine order, they are too fragile to bear by themselves the freight of meaning with which they are credited. Without knowing the context of action and institutions, there is no way to interpret the stories, and when the context is given, they are not so much stories as verbal rites.

The stories, as Verdier interprets them, are about, and for, women who live in villages strictly divided into male and female spheres. Her book (1979) about such a village has practically nothing to say about the men. They appear here only as shadowy background figures, utterly dependent on women who bring them into the world as babies, and see them out of it when they prepare the corpses for burial. In the women's culture, women are at the centre of the universe, the men at the periphery. Women are in tune with nature and the seasons, and have cosmic responsibilities. In a real sense they have created a world that reverses the world of men, not merely at the level of the domestic house, but through their association with the phases of the moon and the cycle of vegetation.

In the opposite world the men see themselves as hunters (Jolas 1990). There are men's life cycle rituals,

coarser than the coarsest of the versions of Red Riding Hood. The style in itself marks the difference between male and female spheres. In the village of Minot the annual pig-killings were the occasion of hilarious scatological rites that left the little boys in no doubt about their future sexual roles. Stories about the female child appropriating the sexual parts of the grandmother are matched on the male side by the pantomime of filling the little boys' pockets with pigs' testicles. The contrast between the medium of instruction is striking. If we thought that the original stories of the little girl's cannibal feast and the titillating scene of her in bed with the wolf were crude, they are much more refined than the counterpart lessons for the boys. The medium speaks for the domestic scope of the woman compared with the men's work of the farm and with animals. After all, the feminine version is only verbal, the masculine version is a vulgar mime. The little girl politely drinks the blood and eats the meat; she has cooked it over the fire and served it in bowls and dishes taken out of cupboards. Her lesson is just a bit of a story; the other half is told when the young boy is chased around the farmyard, bleeding pig's entrails thrown at him, real pig's innards on his head and in his clothes, amid the teasing laughter of the farming neighbourhood who attend the pig-killing as if it were a major ceremony.

Some of the meaning lies in the contrast between points on the dignity scale within the stories, and also between the genres. The French boys are put lower than the girls (as in our nursery rhymes about girls being made of sugar and spice, and boys of frogs and snails); the man-eating ogres get their meaning from their placing on this scale below the profane life of humans, who get more of their own meaning by being placed below the sacred life of ancestral spirits.

The vigour and realism of the teaching of sex roles in the evocation of the respective scenes of work is a far cry from the desiccated sex instruction in our schools. Yvonne Verdier herself has commented (in the article cited) on the de-feminisation of modern culture which has made it so difficult to think about femininity at all, and so has made it difficult to recognise these stories as teaching about gender.

The lesson for the would-be mythologist or folklorist is that the story is a comment on something that is currently happening. Before mythology developed as a science about words, this is what many myth-like stories would have been. When a myth seems to be an inverted version of another myth, two fields of action will always be self-defined by reference to each other. In the ogre tales of the Southern Bantu the profane life of humans contrasts with that of the ancestral spirits, and ogres are contrasted with both. The main novelty of this approach is to seek the interpretation from outside the verbal story. The words of the tale are oblique commentary on standardised actions, employing several registers, one

resonating against the other. Here I am indebted to Anita Jacobson-Widding's rich and original adaptation (Jacobson-Widding 1990) of Paul Ricoeur's analysis of levels of discourse (Ricoeur 1979). The actions on which the Bantu ogre tales comment are sacrificial actions, offerings of slain domestic animals to ancestors: the ancestors protect humans, the ogres eat them. Detailing the indecent topography of internal organs contributes to the entertainment value of the tales, and makes the same point about relative dignity as does the graded difference in physicality in the treatment of boys and girls in Minot. Ancestors are spiritual beings, ogres are gross creatures; girls are sheltered, protected from the real rough stuff of life, which boys must manfully confront in all its bloody, physical vulgarity.

For there to be mythology at all, or ritual at all, the culture will be formed around some grand central act which integrates the different forms of life. The central facts of existence will not be the same for men and women. For the women's culture in Minot the cosmogenic acts were births and burials, celebrated by christenings, marriages and funerals in which women played a central role. More private events underpinning the whole system were their own personal arrivals at puberty, their menstrual cycles, pregnancies, miscarriages and menopause. At the centre of the interpretation there is the physical model of their being, congruent with the cycle of nature.

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Notes

This talk is intended to honour the memory of Katharine Briggs. It is also a tribute to the late Yvonne Verdier, whose fieldwork in a French village and whose analysis of the Red Riding Hood stories and criticism are the basis of the interpretation given here.

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